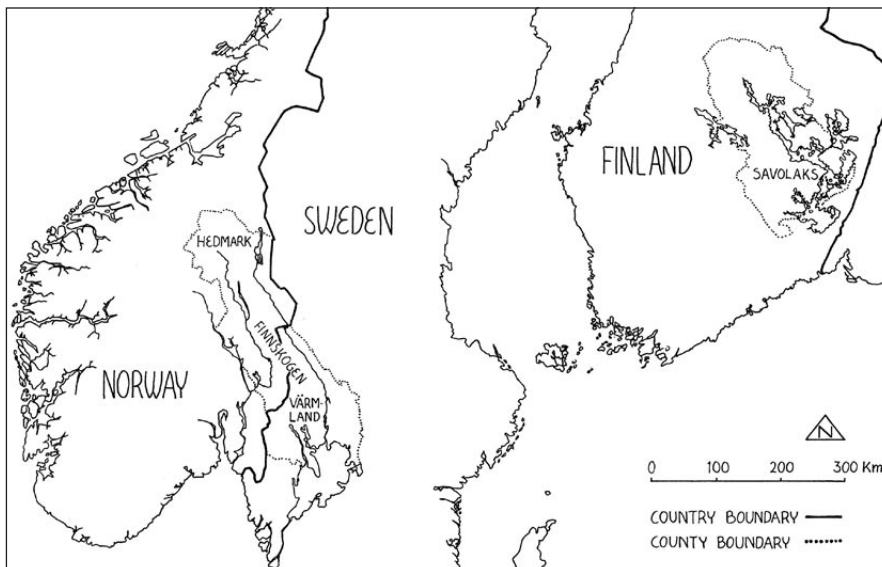




## The Forest Finns of Norway and Sweden and their use and conception of the landscape

In this paper, I will discuss the concept of ‘utmark’ by using Finnskogen, the forest of the Finns, an area on the border between Norway and Sweden, as a point of departure. I will discuss a society which used the forest intensively for multiple purposes, and look at the use of the utmark by *Skogfinnene*, the Forest Finns. These are a group of people who originally lived in Savolaks in Finland, where during the Middle Ages, they took up a special form of farming. In the old spruce forests they grew a certain type of rye in a slash-and-burn technique. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, some of them moved to Sweden and Norway, mainly because war and the scarcity of forest made the living conditions very poor in Finland. The slash-and-burn technique demanded vast areas of old spruce forest. In this way, it was an expansive element inherent in their culture. The Forest Finns found attractive forest areas on the border between Norway and Sweden, where they established small communities in the extensive forest areas.



**Figure 1.** Scandinavia and Finland with Savolaks and Finnskogen (drawing by Ole Magne Nøttveit)

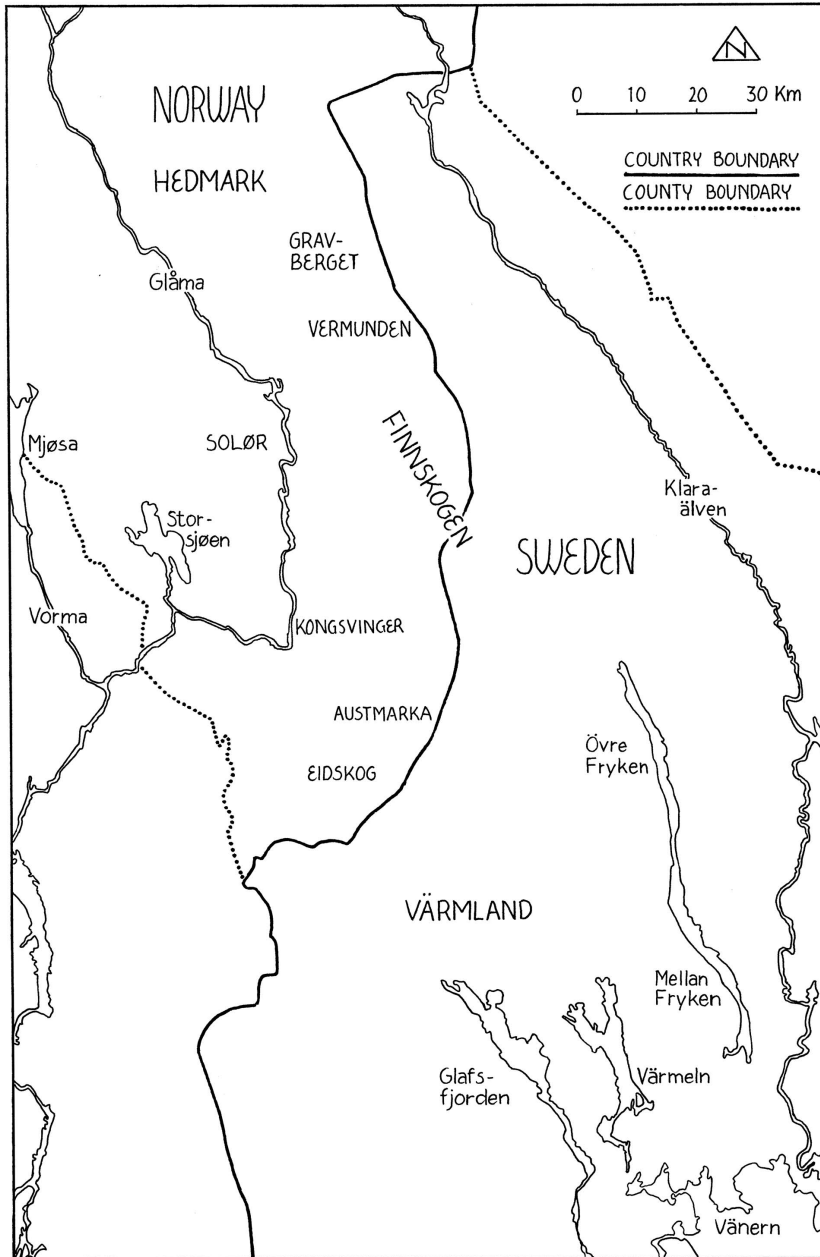


Figure 2. Finnshogen (drawing by Ole Magne Nøttveit)

As far as I have been able to confirm, the first written source mentioning 'skovfinner' in Norway is a petition dating from 1646 from the farmers in Solør, complaining about Finns who used their forests and fished in their lakes (Riksarkivet 1906:305). In a letter from 1648, the Danish and Norwegian King Frederik III

declared that Skogfinnene either had to leave the country or settle down as ordinary taxpayers (Lundh and Øverland 1887:132). A census was undertaken of all *Skogfinner* in Norway in 1686 (Opsahl and Winge 1990). This census shows that they inhabited many farms in Finnskogen.

‘Skogfinnene’ settled down in a landscape, which, at that time, was mainly used as utmark. In the northern area of the Norwegian Finnskogen, only the present farms of Haraldskogen and Vermunden are mentioned earlier than the Finnish colonisation. Haraldskogen, today a part of the farm Gravberget, is mentioned in 1557 and 1578. Vermunden, or as it then was written ‘Werdminschooug’ is mentioned in documents from 1578 and 1616 (Rygh 1900). It has not been possible to establish whether these two properties were separately owned areas of forest or inhabited or deserted farms. In the southern end of Finnskogen, a group of farms close to the Swedish border have been in more or less continuous use since the medieval period. These farms are situated in the present-day parish of Austmarka. Several of these farms are mentioned in sixteenth century written sources (*ibid.*), at which time they may have been deserted for a period after the Black Death in 1350 but remained separate taxation objects. Norwegian farms also existed in this area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but place names also indicate Finnish settlements. Of the 14 assessed farms in Austmarka, 12 are mentioned earlier than 1595. Three of these farms were reported to be inhabited by ‘Skogfinner’ in 1686 (Opsahl and Winge 1990). One of the farms was told to be cleared from of the forest, one was recounted as bought by a ‘Skogfinne’, and on the last one 50 % of the farm was leased by a ‘Skogfinne’. Also other farms in the present municipality of Kongsvinger were inhabited earlier than the Finnish immigration to Norway, but nevertheless populated by ‘Skogfinner’ in 1686.

Name of farm	Municipality	First mentioned yYear	Mentioned yYear 1647	Mentioned in the census on Finns from 1686
Kolbjørnsrud	Kongsvinger	1400	x	x
Fagernes	Kongsvinger	1557	x	x
Varaldskogen	Kongsvinger	1557		x
Ellingsrud	Kongsvinger	1578	x	x
Finsrud	Eidskog	1578	x	x
Sigernes	Kongsvinger	1578	x	x
Bøslungen	Kongsvinger	1594	x	x
Hafsjømoen	Eidskog	1667		x
Lindberget	Kongsvinger	1667		x
Løfhøyden	Uncertain	1686		x
Wesberig setter	Uncertain	1686		x
Westfieldskougen	Eidskog	1686		x
Åserud seter	Kongsvinger	1686		x

Figure 3. Old farms in Finnskogen, in today's municipalities of Kongsvinger and Eidskog

In the southern part of Finnskogen, ‘Skogfinnene’ did not only clear new farms in the forest, but they chose to buy or rent parts of existing farms, as shown in the table (figure 3). In addition to information about when the farms were first recorded, and the name of the farms mentioned in the census from 1686, the table also gives information about which farms were mentioned in a land register from 1647 (Fladby and Try 1970).

‘Skogfinnene’ did not, however, colonise a virgin forest in the border areas of Norway and Sweden. In the medieval period, up to about 1350, there was an intensive use of the Finnskogen area.

Today, a number of monuments and sites bear witness to the use of the forest for multiple purposes in the Middle Ages. Today, the main traceable activity in the Finnskogen area is bloomery iron making, including both iron extraction sites and charcoal pits. In certain areas, up to 13 charcoal pits per square kilometre have been found through intensive surveying. A site with clearance cairns dated to the Viking period by means of palaeoecological evidence has also been recognised. Another locality with clearance cairns is dated to the late Middle Ages, with a calibrated C14-date to about 1400–1650 AD. Hunting pits are dated to the early Iron Age, the late Iron Age as well as the medieval period (Holm 2002:32–33), while tar extraction sites have been dated from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century (*ibid.*:34).

Type of monument	Våler	Åsnes	Grue	Kongsvinger	Eidskog	Sum
Charcoal pits	648	351	147	4	20	1170
Iron extraction sites	44	30	15	2	6	97
Hunting pits	33	309	134	75	73	624
Tar extraction sites	11	10	12	12	3	48
Fossil fields	1	2	9	12	1	25
Sum	737	702	317	105	103	1964

**Figure 4.** Monuments from Finnskogen from the medieval period

Both burning of charcoal and farming activities in fields with clearance cairns resulted in massive felling of timber. In 1350, the forest in the Finnskogen area probably constituted a cultural landscape which was marked by about 300 years of more or less intensive utilisation. After the Black Death, the iron making stopped completely. Now, the forest was only used for household purposes, such as pasture and for felling timber for building houses and firewood. In the 300 year long period from the Black Death and up to the Finnish colonisation, the coniferous forest thus regained its domination in the Finnskogen area. In the forest, which was probably quite evenly aged, Skogfinnene found ideal conditions for their slash-and-burn farming and settled down.

‘Skogfinnene’ used the landscape for multiple purposes. They had their small farms, or ‘torpar’ as they were often called in Finnskogen. This was an ordinary farm with farmhouses for people, animals and storage, surrounded by permanent tilled fields, usually up to 1,5 hectares in the seventeenth century (Wedin 2001:50). This

is about the same field size as the smallest, separately taxed, medieval farms in eastern Norway (Øye 2002:313). In the forest they had their swiddens, often far away from the farm. They were tilled for a couple of years, and then used as pastures, before they were left over to the forest again. The forest was also used for hunting, and the rivers and lakes for fishing. In addition, the forest also supplied a variety of raw materials.

'Skogfinnene' used four different types of slash-and-burn techniques. It was *huuhta*, which is the most well-known and involves the burning down of mature spruce forest for growing rye and turnips. *Kaski* was used in a mixed forest or in deciduous forests. The trees were cut down and left to dry, before the area was burned in the autumn, and then sown with rye or turnips. *Tulimaa* was practised in young deciduous forests, which were cut down to dry and then burned in spring and sown with turnips or barley, and the following year with oats. They could come back to the place after 20-30 years of fallow. *Pykälökkömaa* was practised in pine forests, which were converted to deciduous forest by removing the bark from the pine trees which caused them to die. After this, deciduous trees grew up and could be used as *kaski* or *tulimaa* swiddens (Tvensberg 1985:60-61).

The first and the last of these techniques were probably used exclusively by 'Skogfinnene', at least the *huuhta*-variety where the special sort of swidden rye was used. Other *huuhta*-like techniques have probably been used in virgin or mature forests around the world. What characterised the *huuhta* was that it was not used as the first stage in a permanent clearing, but only for a short time. *Tulimaa* was also used in Norway before 'Skogfinnene' arrived. In a topographical description of Norway from 1650, the scholar Arent Berntsen gives a very negative description of the coniferous forest, which is called 'suur-skouff', or acidic wood. He describes swiddens as 'places covered with scrubs and heather which can be cleared and used as swiddens' (my translation) (Berntsen 1971, *anden bog*, p. 37, 40-41). He is certainly not referring to coniferous forests, and is close to the description of *tulimaa*. This indicates that different types of slash-and-burn techniques were used in Norway before the arrival of 'Skogfinnene'.

How did 'Skogfinnene' organise their landscape? From both Norway and Sweden we know that the farming landscape was organised in an infield and outfield system in the post-medieval time. Did 'Skogfinnene' organise their landscape in the same way, or did they conceptualise it differently? Did they also place the farmstead and the forest as two different categories? I will approach these questions by looking at the oral tradition of Finnskogen.

The oral tradition of Finnskogen is collected from the early nineteenth century and onwards. The last Finnish-speaking people in Finnskogen lived well into the twentieth century. The oral tradition in the area tells much about 'Skogfinnene's' abilities as sorcerers (Lindtorp 1943:51-52, Bladh 1995:225). They were able to control their environment, catching birds in their traps and fish with their fishhooks. Norwegian oral tradition, on the other hand, mainly discusses meetings between named individuals and supernatural beings, where the last category represents a threat

to the humans. The forest, or the *utmark*, is a dangerous place in the Norwegian oral tradition. The oral tradition of 'Skogfinnene' is different, as it focuses on men, and some women, who were able to control their environment, including the forest (Bladh 1995:224). They were even able to make the bears do what they wanted, and also able to transform themselves and act as bears or other animals. These sorcerers have traits that link them to the arctic shamanism of Northern Eurasia. The traditional religion of the Finns was probably a shamanistic religion with roots in the arctic shamanism (Oinas 1985:41).

How did 'Skogfinnene' take a new landscape into use? 'Skogfinnene' were able to walk considerable distances through wide forest tracts to find places where they could have a swidden. This is demonstrated through the colonisation of the interior of Finland by the forefathers of 'Skogfinnene' (Nikander 1951:108, Vilkuna 1953, Jokipii 1995:24). When necessary, a family or a group of families sent a man out to find places for new swiddens. When the pathfinder found a suitable south-facing slope with old spruce forest, he marked some trees with his family's symbol, and composed a song (rune) about the place and how to find the way back to it (Tvengsberg 1995:65). It seems that 'Skogfinnene' looked upon the landscape as 'unlimited' in some way. They had methods for discovering the landscape and bringing it into use. They did not hesitate to undertake long journeys in a totally unknown landscape.

The landscape of 'Skogfinnene' was populated with different supernatural beings. As the old Finnish religion was, to a great extent, shamanistic, it is possible to find traces of natural mysticism and pantheism in the old Finnish beliefs. This is found in the old Kalevala verses. When it comes to the different supernatural beings that populated the landscape, these were very much the same as those which were collected in the Swedish areas. Most common was the so-called 'skogsrået', a kind of fairy or guardian of the forest. She appeared as a beautiful woman from one side, but behind she had a tail, and her back was hollow like an old tree. A similar being was 'sjörået' who was guarding a lake and controlling the fish there (Palmqvist 1924:112-120, Broberg 1953:77-78). The tradition about these beings was maybe a blend of Swedish/Norwegian and genuine Finnish traditions. In old rune songs, beings like 'vattenrået', 'vattenfrun', the lady of the water, and 'skogens husmor', the housewife of the forest, are mentioned (Kuusi and Honko 1983:30, 39). In these verses, the actual beings are called upon for help. This is quite different from the Norwegian tradition about 'huldra', a female being living in the forest. She was considered dangerous, as she seduced men working in the forest. 'Skogfinnene' also believed in the thunder god, named Ukko, or more commonly in Finnskogen, Gofar or Himmelskofar, good father or good father in the sky (Palmqvist 1924:127).

'Skogfinnene' did not consider the beings of the forest to be dangerous and threatening. Even though the beings like 'vattenrået' or 'skogsrået' were powerful, it was possible to get help from them by using the right incantations or possessing the right power. Skogfinnene had, as far as I have been able to find out, a positive attitude towards the forest. Some researchers have claimed that the Finno-Ugric culture looked upon nature and the culturally modified environment as a whole, and not as dualistic

oppositions (Ilomäki 1988:9). In old incantations for good hunting, the different animals were addressed in a respectful way (*ibid.*:13).

‘Skogfinnene’ had ways of becoming familiar with the landscape and taking it into use. As mentioned, they composed songs about the landscape in order to become familiar with a new landscape. Place-names have also been used to familiarise a new landscape. ‘Skogfinnene’ from Savolaks used their old family names when they named their farms. In this way, it was possible to transform an unknown landscape into a cultural landscape with its own history. This may be a useful analogy for the use of landscapes in the Iron Age and the Middle Ages in Norway.

A central being of Finnish mythology is *Sampsa Pellervoinen*. In the Finnish national epic poem of *Kalevala*, he is described as a young boy who is sowing seeds in the barren land where nothing grows. He ensures the fertility of both the forest and the fields (Tvengsborg 1985:68). The poem describes in detail how he sows the different trees in their right place, the birch in the wetland, the spruce in the hills where the swiddens should be, the oaks near the coast. This shows that the Finns had a close relationship with the forest and the trees and knew exactly which trees grew in each place. The verses also show how close the relation between the forest and the grain growing was for a people who used a slash-and-burn technique in their farming.

*Pellervoinen, the field's son  
Sampsa, tiny boy –  
he is to sow lands  
and make crops fruitful!  
He got down to sowing lands  
he sowed lands, sowed swamps  
he sowed sandy glades  
he has boulders set.  
Hills he sowed for pines  
sowed mounds for spruces  
and heaths for heather  
and hollows for young saplings.  
On lowlands he sowed birches  
alders in light soils  
sowed bird cherries in new soil  
and goat willows in fresh soil  
and rowans on holy ground  
and willows on rising ground  
junipers on barren lands  
and oaks on the banks of streams.  
(Lønrot/Bosley 1999:11)*



The worldview of the Forest Finns, with its shamanistic traits, emphasises the landscape as unlimited space and the nature as controllable and not dangerous. This worldview does not have a dualistic division between infield and utmark. It shows that even though farming is in many ways a different way of using the nature as compared with hunting, it does not mean that a farming society, which 'Skogfinnene' constituted, necessarily needed to have a dualistic approach to their surrounding landscape, with the farm and the infield as good and safe and the utmark as a dangerous part of the landscape.

## Summary

*Skogfinnene* (the Forest Finns) are a group of people who originally lived in Savolaks in Finland, where they, probably during the Middle Ages, took up farming, growing a certain sort of rye, in a slash-and-burn technique, in old spruce forests. Some of them moved to Sweden and Norway at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, mainly because war and scarcity of forest made the living conditions very poor in Finland. They established small communities in the extensive forest areas on the border between Norway and Sweden. The oral tradition of Finnskogen, the forest of the Finns, an area on the border between Norway and Sweden, tells much about their abilities as sorcerers. It focuses on men, and some women, who were able to control their environment. These sorcerers have traits that link them to the arctic shamanism of Northern Eurasia. The Forest Finns were able to walk considerable distances through wide forest tracts to find places where they could have a swidden. I have discussed their perception of their landscape and how they structured their landscape and organised it in belief and tradition. It seems that the Forest Finns looked upon the landscape as 'unlimited' in some way. They had methods for discovering and exploiting the landscape

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